

School-Wise Environmental Awareness

Mary Rowland Personal Finance Column – September 2008

The end of another summer and the beginning of a new year of learning. One of the major topics your students have been hearing about over the summer is the soaring cost of energy. Many teachers have been talking about the need to sustain the environment for years now. But this school year, students might be ripe for learning more because big chunks of the family budget now go to energy costs.

Start with school supplies. As I shopped for school supplies for my children, Tom, 18, and Krista, 22, both college students, I thought of all the old notebooks and art paper and pens and poster board and construction paper I found crumpled and ruined when I cleaned out the kids' basement room this summer.

Tom says he's not interested in buying school supplies. "The best way to go green is to not buy stuff," he said. He plans to use his laptop computer to take notes in classes, to write and edit papers, and to use recycled paper to print out assignments. He feels the same way about clothing: Two pairs of jeans, two sweaters, a pair of shoes and a couple of shirts.

When I asked Krista and Tom for some of their most memorable lessons on the environment, they said they remember teachers who made reducing waste a life priority, starting with making their own school supplies out of recycled milk cartons and glass jars.

Krista and Tom both remember a sixth grade science teacher, a Buddhist who wore simple clothes and no makeup, and brought her lunch to school in washable containers.

Krista remembered this woman as a dedicated environmentalist more than ten years ago. She took the kids on field trips to the garbage dump and to a recycling plant where they learned about sorting for recycling and separating the different colors of glass. The class also read a story about a family of four who discarded only two garbage cans of trash over a two-year period. "They recycled, composted, and bought things with little packaging," Krista said. "That environmental stuff stuck with me."

Tom also remembers the dump and the elaborate project—including a mind map constructed on a single sheet of newsprint—that students were required to complete. This teacher often gave them one sheet of paper or poster board for an assignment and they were required to bring it in on that paper so as not to be wasteful.

The eighth grade science teacher was even more memorable. "He was a regular teacher until the end of the year when he started talking about his piles," Tom said. This teacher, who lived in Germany during World War II, believes that each of us throughout our lives creates a pile of trash. This is what our life will be measured by. The one with the smallest pile at the end wins.

He told the students that everything a person purchased during a lifetime that could not be recycled would be added to his pile. The teacher traveled everywhere by bicycle. When he had to buy something, he bought it used, at a thrift shop. All of these things would go on someone else's pile rather than his own. The kids still remind one another (and me): "If you buy that new, it goes on your pile."

Do students need a separate notebook for each class, most of which will end in the trash? I remember middle school when the children carried backpacks as big as they were. Buying fewer supplies saves on the family budget, too. Perhaps you could have a contest to see who can figure out the best way to reuse some of the supplies in the closets at home.

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You might put class assignments on a computer web site. And ask students to think of other ways to eliminate paper. Tom remembers a fourth grade math teacher who required that each student memorize the multiplication tables up to 12 times 12. This was not a written assignment. Each child had to stand in the front of the room and recite them—within a given amount of time—to get a grade on the project. Tom remains grateful for this useful lesson.

Other possible projects:

Have children find articles or pictures or cartoons about how students have gone green. When a trailer that was used for classrooms burned down in Grant Elementary in Missouri, a local architect offered to design and help build an all-green classroom to replace it. This article was published in the Columbia Missourian.

Ask each child to bring in one idea each week for a way to reduce waste: Shutting down computers and lights at night, cleaning up a local park, competing to see who produces the least waste from lunch at school for a week.

And when you do buy classroom supplies, keep a record. A special tax deduction for educators allows them to deduct up to \$250 from income for un-reimbursed classroom materials. The deduction is not limited to teachers, but also applies to counselors, principals, and aides.

Additional expenses can be deducted under the miscellaneous section on Schedule A. But miscellaneous deductions are subject to a floor that equals 2 percent of your adjusted gross income (AGI.)

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